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Patti Borello

Western Michigan University, patti.a.borrello@wmich.edu

Barbara Frazier

Western Michigan University, frazier@wmich.edu

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A study of the symbolic clothing disposition behaviors of Generation Y

Patti Borrello, Barbara Frazier, Western Michigan University, USA

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This qualitative study explored symbolic clothing behaviors of Generation Y women in relation to the disposition of their wedding gowns. The wedding gown is a symbolic garment that is steeped in tradition and is part of an important rite of passage ceremony (Geller, 2001). The wedding gown reflects the values and beliefs of the bride's culture (Whelehan & Carter, 2007). Over the last sixty years the white wedding gown has become the standard costume of the American bride. A review of the current media reflects a change in the disposition behavior of Generation Y; websites encourage women to sell their gowns, donate them to charities, or destroy the gowns in photo shoots.

Material possession attachment framed the qualitative research by identifying levels of possession attachment as they relate to the wedding gown. Material possession attachment is a complex relationship between an individual and a specific material possession (Kleine & Baker, 2004). People develop strong emotional attachments to possessions into which they have invested themselves. Individuals invest mental energy in an object by devoting effort, time, and attention, and the more mental energy or attention an item gets the more important it becomes. Material possessions connect owners to others, representing interpersonal ties; Possessions may have an emotional attachment to events and people, and portray heritage and traditions that help to tell an individual's life story, strengthening the attachment to the material possession. Attachment to material possessions can be affected by life transitions such as marriage or divorce. In order to understand attachment to symbolic garments such as wedding gowns, it is important to understand the meaning and value of the garment to the owner and how it reflects his or her identity. The value of a symbolic garment is not only in the cost and quality of the garment, but also in the emotional attachment. Strong attachments are made to possessions that define the owner as a person and strengthen their identity as an individual and as a member of a group ((Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Kleine, Kleine & Allen, 1995)

The study explored the following research questions: (1) What disposition methods are used by Generation Y wedding gown owners after the wedding? (2) Why do brides choose a particular disposition method?, and (3) How is attachment to a wedding gown related to disposition behavior? A non-probability, chain referral purposive approach was used to recruit participants for the study. Potential participants included American women born between 1980-1994 who purchased wedding gowns and had been married for at least two years. The two-year beyond marriage was selected as a condition of participation so that participants would have had sufficient time to make and act upon a disposition decision. Subjects were recruited by posting an invitation on the Facebook social networking site. Fifteen individuals were interviewed for the study. The goal for sample selection was to represent each of two general disposition categories

(keeping and disposing) in the sample. Data were collected via phone and Skype interviews, which ranged in duration from 9 to 20 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each participant's interview was analyzed individually and then variables were identified that were present in other participants' interviews.

The disposition behaviors of the study participants reflected many of the disposition behaviors described in the literature. Five cleaned and stored their dress in a preservation box, four saved, but did not clean the dress, two repurposed their dress, one rented her dress out, one donated her dress to charity, one sold her dress, and one trashed her dress in a photo shoot. Unexpected post-wedding disposition behaviors included saving the gown without cleaning or preserving, repurposing and renting the gown. Results of the study also indicated that the participant's mother had a strong influence on disposition behavior.

It was noted in this study that some women hung their wedding gowns in the closet without cleaning or care. The reason for the behavior in this study was varied and contradictory. This disposition behavior is not described in the literature or in the media. Roster (2001) noted that neglect, concealment, and continued storage without use is part of divestment rituals that lead to disposition. Neglect is considered when a garment is not cared for by cleaning and/or storing in a safe place. This study also noted that six of the women interviewed said that their mothers saved and stored their gown dirty. The neglect of symbolic garments of Baby Boomers has not been studied. A qualitative research study interviewing both groups of women could explore the neglect of the wedding gown and the reason for this disposition behavior.

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